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# PORTRAIT OF A LADY

BY GAMALIEL BRADFORD, JR.

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JANE AUSTEN lived her brief life in two or three quiet English towns. She had no adventures, no experiences, no great fortunes or misfortunes. She began to do her best writing when she was little more than a girl. She left a few immortal works, surpassed by no others in the painting of the human heart. What sort of woman was she herself? Not very remarkable to look at, it appears. Round, full cheeks—"for the most part they are foolish that are so," Cleopatra tells us—bright, hazel eyes, brown curls about her face. No doubt, in every point a lady. But her soul?

At first sight, it seems that she laughed, mocked, at all things, very gently and decorously, but still mocked. "I dearly love a laugh," says the heroine who surely most resembles her creatress. And again it is said of this same Elizabeth Bennett: "She had a lively, playful disposition which delighted in anything ridiculous."

Those who love Miss Austen best will recognize, far beyond any testimony of quoted instances, this incessant, pervading spirit of gentle mockery which appears in all her books, courteous, infinitely well-bred, but sometimes very far from amiable.

That she should mock at woman's education was, perhaps, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, natural enough. But it would be hard to find any one in any century who has mocked at it more cruelly. "Where people wish to attach, they should always be ignorant. To come with a well-informed mind is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid. A woman, especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can." Which was also the opinion of Lady Mary Montagu, considered one of the most learned women of her time. Now we have changed all that.

But if you suppose that Miss Austen wishes to contrast

with learning the sweets of domesticity, you are far astray indeed. I do not know whether she read La Rochefoucauld. She hardly needed to. In any case, she well supports his dictum that there are comfortable marriages, but no delicious ones. The motive of most she lashes with her whip of silken scorn. "His temper might perhaps be a little soured by finding, like many others of her sex, that through some unaccountable bias in favor of beauty, he was the husband of a very silly woman." Though she had a sister whom she loved better than anything on earth, the kindest thing she could find to say of two most affectionate sisters was: "Among the merits and the happiness of Elinor and Marianne, let it not be ranked as the least considerable that, though sisters, and living almost within sight of each other, they could live without disagreement between themselves or producing coolness between their husbands."

Nor is she much more enthusiastic about the charms of society. Her heroines do, indeed, love an outing or a ball; but much more stress is laid on untoward accidents that blight enjoyment than on its rapturous completeness. And this is life, as we all know. Only—. As for the little distresses of social converse, who has ever depicted them more subtly?

No one probably will maintain that Miss Austen treats love very seriously. Its common youthful ardors, "what is so often described as arising on a first interview with its object, and even before two words have been exchanged," she makes matter for derision or dismisses with indifference. Isabella utters a platitude on the subject. "This charming sentiment, recommended as much by sense as novelty, gave Catherine a pleasing remembrance of all the heroines of her acquaintance." With the author's own serious heroines love is an emotion of such reverend profundity that the heroines themselves require years to discover it, and even then it has to be forced upon their notice.

Religion and the deeper concerns of life generally, where they are mentioned at all, fare no better. They are touched with an irony of somewhat dubious effect on the profane, as at the end of *Northanger Abbey*, where those it may concern are left to wonder "whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience." There is no doubt, however, that Miss Austen sincerely honored sacred things. She would have

said with her own Elizabeth, "I hope I never ridicule what is wise and good." She appeared to think she would attain this end by keeping matters of the soul mainly out of her work. But she miscalculated a little. I do not know how one could more discredit religion than by exhibiting it in such representatives as Dr. Grant, Mr. Elton, and Mr. Collins: a glutton, a ninny, and an imbecile. If any reader holds that the prosy sermonizing of Edward Bertram helps the divine end of the matter, I disagree totally.

And as she mocked all things in human life, so she had a peculiar fancy for mocking the departure out of it. We know much mockable is there; but it seems odd material for a young girl to deal with. "It was felt as such things must be felt. Everybody had a degree of gravity and sorrow; tenderness for the departed, solicitude for the surviving friends; and, in a reasonable time, curiosity to know where she would be buried. Goldsmith tells us that when lovely woman stoops to folly, she has nothing to do but to die; and when she stoops to be disagreeable, it is equally to be recommended as a clearer of ill fame."

Obviously, Miss Austen's mocking was not all sweet, sunny, natural gaiety. It had too much ill-nature in it. This shows, I think, in her fundamental conception of character. Read over her list of *dramatis personæ* and see how many are attractive or agreeable. It is not that she presents set types of evil or folly. Far from it. Her people are all human, vividly human, walking figures of flesh-and-blood humanity. But like all true human beings, they have good and evil both, and her vision always turns toward the evil, the mildly evil, the foolish and ridiculous. This perversion is slight, but constant, and its very slightness makes it more true—and more depressing. What doubles the hideousness of the hideous scene between Mr. and Mrs. Dashwood (*Sense and Sensibility*, Chap. II.) is its perfect humanity and the possibility that it might have been you and I.

She will brand a whole company with a touch: they "almost all labored under one or other of these disqualifications for being agreeable—want of sense, either natural or improved—want of elegance—want of spirits—or want of temper." As any company might, to be sure—if you took it so. She will brand a whole sex. Mr. Palmer had "no traits at all unusual in his sex and time of life. He was nice in

his eating, uncertain in his hours; fond of his child, though affecting to slight it; and idled away the morning at billiards, which ought to have been devoted to business."

Above all, she is severe upon women past middle life. Few indeed has she drawn that are even tolerable. Yet I have known some who were charming. With what infinite, subtle, loving art are Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Norris made odious! And the best illustration of all for Miss Austen's methods is Miss Bates. Her creatress starts with a heroic determination to be amiable for once. God has given this poor old specimen excellent qualities. For Heaven's sake, let us dwell upon them and leave the defects in shadow. "She was a happy woman, and a woman whom no one named without good-will. It was her own universal good-will and contented temper which worked such wonders. She loved everybody, was interested in everybody's happiness, quick-sighted to everybody's merits." Yet the turning of a page makes Miss Bates ridiculous, and the turning of more makes her almost as tedious to us as the author evidently found her. In the end she drives even Emma to open insult, which Emma speedily regrets, and would probably as speedily renew.

But, it will be urged, I am making the old mistake of interpreting an author from her writings, of transferring to her the sentiments of her characters, or, at any rate, her merely formal literary expression.

Very well, let us turn to Miss Austen's letters, and see what we find there. To begin with, they are charming letters, full of life, spirit, and vivacity, quite as charming as her novels. Her editors and biographers seem to feel it necessary to apologize for them. Why? It is true they contain no reference to topics of the day. She might never have heard of Napoleon, or known that America was discovered. But, as letters, they are none the worse for that. Also, they are not formally literary, have no set pieces or elaborate disquisitions. There is hardly a general thought in the whole of them. Who cares? They are literary as being the work of one of the most exquisite masters of expression. But, in general, they are merely the swiftest, lightest chronicle of little daily happenings, made eternal by a sense of fun as keen as Lamb's. Is there in Lamb any bit of happier nonsense than the sketch of Mr. Haden? "You seem to be under a mistake as to Mr. H. You call

him an apothecary. He is no apothecary; he has never been an apothecary; there is not an apothecary in this neighborhood. . . . He is a Haden, nothing but a Haden, a sort of wonderful nondescript creature on two legs, something between a man and an angel, but without the least spice of an apothecary. He is, perhaps, the only person *not* an apothecary hereabouts. He has never sung to us. He will not sing without pianoforte accompaniment."

Yet, minute as they are, and natural as they are, Miss Austen's letters tell us little about herself, that is, the inmost self that we wish to get at. Those we have were almost all written to her nearest and dearest sister, Cassandra. To Cassandra, if to any one, she must have opened her soul. But, if so, she did it by lip and not by letter. It is rare indeed that she goes so far as to say, "I am sick of myself and my bad pens." To be sure, such concealment of personal feeling and emotion is a most significant trait of character. The gleam and glitter of those sparkling pages, with all their implication and suggestion, recalls the charming speech of Birnheim to Fanny Lear—" *Ce qui fait le charme de votre conversation, ce n'est pas seulement ce que vous dites, c'est encore et surtout ce que vous ne dites pas.*" But when we try to get any definite picture of the writer, she seems a fairy, a spirit, in perpetual, glimmering, mazy dance, refusing to stand still.

At any rate, mockery is the prominent feature in the letters, as in the novels; and in letters as in novels the mockery, though sometimes sunny and sweet, is too often unkindly and leaves a sting. Miss Austen herself once at least recognizes this. She describes a certain person as "the sort of woman who gives me the idea of being determined never to be well and who likes her spasms and nervousness, and the consequence they give her, better than anything else. This is an ill-natured statement to send all over the Baltic." Doubtless her modesty prevented her from thinking of the ill-natured statements she was to send for ages all over the world.

But let us see, again, with more minuteness how completely she spins this gauze web of satire over every phase of life. Is learning in question? "I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible vanity, the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress." Or is she discussing family life? "The possessor of one

of the finest estates in England and of more worthless nephews and nieces than any other private man in the United Kingdom." A prospective marriage is summarily disposed of. Mr. Blackall is "a piece of perfection—noisy perfection. . . . I could wish Miss Lewis to be of a silent turn and rather ignorant, but naturally intelligent and wishing to learn, fond of cold veal pies, green tea in the afternoon, and a green window-blind at night." Mrs. Austen is disturbed by receiving an unamiable letter from a relative. Miss Austen is not. "The discontentedness of it shocked and surprised her—but *I* see nothing in it out of nature."

As to society, she resembles her heroines in liking balls, and, like her heroines, she finds many drawbacks in them. "Our ball was chiefly made up of Jervoises and Terrys, the former of whom were apt to be vulgar, the latter to be noisy. . . . I had a very pleasant evening, however, though you will probably find out that there was no particular reason for it; but I do not think it worth while to wait for enjoyment until there is some real opportunity for it." On beauty she comments freely. "There were very few beauties, and such as there were were not very handsome. Miss Iremonger did not look well, and Mrs. Blount was the only one much admired. She appeared exactly as she did in September, with the same broad face, diamond bandeau, white shoes, pink husband, and fat neck." As in this passage, she often refers to dress and too often unkindly. "Mrs. Powlett was at once expensively and nakedly dressed; we have had the satisfaction of estimating her lace and her muslins; and she said too little to afford us much other amusement." In regard to one special company she seems to express naïvely her general attitude. "I cannot anyhow continue to find people agreeable."

More intimate social relationships and the sacred name of friendship are treated at least as lightly. "The neighborhood have quite recovered the death of Mrs. Rider; so much so that I think they are rather rejoiced at it now; her things were so very dear! And Mrs. Rogers is to be all that is desirable. Not even death itself can fix the friendships of this world."

And love? Persons who mock at nothing else mock at that. What should we expect, then, from the genius of mockery? Whether she rallied her young men to their faces, I

do not know. Assuredly she rallied them behind their backs. One evening she expects an offer, but is determined to refuse, unless he promises to give away his white coat. The next she makes over to a friend all her love interests, even "the kiss which C. Powlett wanted to give me," everything except Tom Lefroy, "for whom I don't care sixpence." And when, writing to her niece, in later years, she sketches the man she might have loved, she ends by turning all into laughter. "There *are* such beings in the world, perhaps one in a thousand, as the creature you and I should think perfection, where grace and spirit are united to worth, where the manners are equal to the heart and understanding, but such a person may not come in your way, or, if he does, he may not be the eldest son of a man of fortune, the near relation of your particular friend and belonging to your own county."

Also, as in the novels, she is perpetually laughing at religion and virtue, that is, of course, at those elements in religion and virtue which are undeniably laughable. Morals and immorals she can treat lightly in individual instances. In their general phases she can jumble them happily with physical complaints. "What is become of all the shyness in the world? Moral as well as natural diseases disappear in the progress of time, and new ones take their place. Shyness and the sweating sickness have given way to confidence and paralytic complaints." On death she is inexhaustible. One would think she found it the most humorous thing in life—as perhaps it is. With what amiable, kid-gloved atrocity does she bury Mrs. Holder! "Only think of Mrs. Holder's being dead! Poor woman, she has done the only thing in the world she could possibly do to make one cease to abuse her." Apparently, even this supreme effort of Mrs. Holder's was not successful—in fact, embalmed her with spiced abuse forever.

Most curious of all is Miss Austen on the death of a near relative, the trim decorum, the correct restraint, the evident fear of being either over-conventional or under-feeling. So in the first letter; but two days later she rebounds and trifles with her mourning. "*One* Miss Baker makes my gown and *the other* my bonnet, which is to be silk covered with crape." Well could she say of herself, "I can lament in one sentence and laugh in the next." Only she immensely mistook the proportion.



One bare, strong phrase takes us right to the root of all the mocking and perversity. "Pictures of perfection, as you know, make me sick and wicked."

It is in this spirit that she makes fun even of her own art, novel-writing, will not take it seriously—"the art of keeping lovers apart in five volumes"—will not take its professors seriously. She mocks at their machinery, their heroines, their landscape, their morals, and their language—"novel slang," she calls it, "thorough novel slang, and so old that I dare say Adam met with it in the first novel he opened." Whatever pains she may have taken with her own work, she does not mention them, unless ironically, when some one praises her: "I am looking about for a sentiment, an illustration, or a metaphor in every corner of the room." If money and profit are suggested as possible objects, she laughs at them. Fame is all she is thinking of. "I write only for fame and without any view to pecuniary emolument." But when it is a question of glory, she laughs at that, and toils instead for pounds and shillings. "Though I like praise as well as anybody, I like what Edward calls *Pewter*, too." Yet, at the getting of money, and at the keeping of it, and at the spending of it, and at the lack of it still she laughs: "They will not come often, I dare say. They live in a handsome style and are rich, and she seemed to like to be rich, and we gave her to understand that we were far from being so; she will soon feel, therefore, that we are not worth her acquaintance."

One subject only is too sacred for mocking—the British navy. And even that seems sacred chiefly in connection with the Austens; for Sir Walter Elliot is allowed to say that all officers should be killed off after forty because of their weather-beaten complexions. Miss Austen herself, however, appears to have been possessed, like Louisa Musgrove, with "a fine naval fervor," which blossoms in Captain Wentworth's rapturous praise of his calling and fruits in the charming conclusion of *Persuasion*: "She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in the domestic virtues than in its national importance." A sentiment which would have delighted Sir Joseph Porter, K.C.B., though it would have obliged Nelson to turn away his face.

So, are we to set down this demure, round-faced chit of

a parson's daughter as one of the universal mockers, *der Geist der stets verneint* in petticoats, a sister of Aristophanes and Heine? It sounds ridiculous. How she would have shrunk from *das Buch Le Grand* and shuddered with horror at *Schnabelwopski*! Yet would she?

But her cynicism is more nearly related to Fielding and Smollett and to the eighteenth century—that is, it does not flow from Heine's universal dissolution of all things, but is founded on a secure basis of conventional belief. Minds of that eighteenth-century type were so confident of God that they felt entirely at liberty to abuse man. "Whatever is right," said the "one infallible Pope," as Miss Austen calls him, therefore there could be no harm in calling it wrong.

On the other hand, what separates Miss Austen from Fielding, what brings her close to Heine, and what almost, if not quite, makes up for all her mocking, is that you feel underneath the mocking an infinite fund of tenderness, a warm, loving, hoping, earnest heart. Rarely has a woman been more misjudged by another than Miss Austen by Miss Brontë when she wrote, "Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete and insensible woman." Oh, no, under that demure demeanor was hidden the germ of every emotion known to woman or to man. She knew them all, she felt them all, and she restrained them all, which means quite as much character—and "temperament" also—as the volcanic flare of Charlotte Brontë. The very difficulty of tracing these things under Miss Austen's vigilant reserve adds to their significance when found and to the convincing force of their reality.

First, as to more general emotions. The testimony of the novels is often disputed. It is disputable when it refers to particular experiences and must be used with care. But many little touches would have been absolutely impossible if the writer had not first felt them herself. Thus it is when she writes that "It is the misfortune of poetry to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoy it completely, and that the strong feelings which alone can estimate it truly are the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly." Or again, with brief and rapid analysis, "She read with an eagerness which hardly left her the power of comprehension; and from impatience of knowing what the next sentence might bring was incapable of attending to the sense

of the one before her eyes." Do you suppose the writer of that had never torn the heart out of a letter as madly as Jane Eyre? And was there not plenty of temperament in the woman who described the moment of release from a disagreeable partner as "ecstasy," and who fainted dead away when told suddenly that she was to leave her old home and seek a new?

Or in another line, how the clever mockery of her own writing withers before one short sentence which shows the real author, like all other authors: "I *should* like to know what her estimate is, but am always half afraid of finding a clever novel *too clever*, and of finding my own story and my own people all forestalled."

Then, as to love. Here the story is more obscure. Some critics have endeavored to deduce Miss Austen's feelings from those of her heroines. Others have entirely denied the legitimacy of such deduction. No doubt observation and divination may do much, but it seems to me that the subtle details introduced in many a critical moment must be based on experiences closely akin to those described. No man can ever understand Miss Austen's taste in heroes, and her creations in this line are the worst of her mockeries, all the more so because unintentional. But if she was blind to the faults of the type, she may have been equally blind to them in some real Edward or Knightley. We all are. I should even like to believe, with her adoring relative, that that shadowy lover who died unnamed to posterity blighted her literary effort and accounted for the singular gap between her earlier and later work. "That her grief should have silenced her is, I think, quite consistent with the reserve of her character," writes the said relative. I agree as to the possibility, but somewhat question the fact.

With the more common domestic and social feelings we are on surer ground. There is a universal concordance of testimony as to Miss Austen's sweetness in these relations, her tenderness, her charm. Guarded, reserved as her letters are, these qualities appear in all the laughter, in all the mockery. She watches over her mother, she longs for every detail about her brothers, she cries for joy at their promotion, she exchanges with her sister a thousand little intimacies, all the more sincere for their daily triviality. It is said that the family were always amiable in their familiar intercourse, never argued or spoke harshly, and I can be-

lieve it. It is said that Cassandra always controlled her temper, but that Jane had no temper to control, and the latter statement I do not believe, but do believe that appearances justified it. It is said that she loved children, and many passages in her letters prove this. See in the following the deep and evident tenderness turning into her eternal mockery. "My dear itty Dordy's remembrance of me is very pleasing to me—foolishly pleasing, because I know it will be over so soon. My attachment to him will be more durable. I shall think with tenderness and delight on his beautiful and smiling countenance and interesting manner until a few years have turned him into an ungracious fellow."

That she enjoyed playing the rôle of maiden aunt I see no reason to imagine. But she accepted it with infinite, sweet graciousness, and as years went on she seems to have grown even more self-forgetful and thoughtful of those about her. I have spoken of Heine. What was ever lovelier than his efforts to spare his old mother every detail of his last torturing illness, writing her the gayest of letters from his pillow of agony? Everything with Miss Austen is on a slighter scale; but how sweet is the story of the sofa. Sofas were scarce in those days. The Austen rooms contained but one, and Jane, dying, propped herself on two chairs, and left the sofa to her invalid mother, declaring that the chairs were preferable.

And if she loved others, they loved her. Her brother makes the truly astonishing statement that in regard to her neighbors "even on their vices did she never trust herself to comment with unkindness. . . . She always sought in the faults of others something to excuse, to forgive or forget." And he adds, "No one could be often in her company without feeling a strong desire of obtaining her friendship and cherishing a hope of having obtained it." The profound affection of her sister Cassandra needs no further evidence than the pathetic letters written by her after Jane's death, and the feeling of the other members of the family seems to have been hardly less deep. Especially was her society cherished by children and young people. "Her first charm to children was great sweetness of manner," writes her niece; "she seemed to love you, and you loved her in return." Again, "Soon came the delight of her playful talk. She could make everything amusing to a child." And later,

when years had somewhat diminished the difference of age, "It had become a habit with me to put by things in my mind with reference to her, and to say to myself, I shall keep this for Aunt Jane!"

Altogether, whatever may have been her instincts of intellectual cynicism, she was past question a woman exquisitely lovable and one who craved and appreciated love, even when she made least show of doing so. How pathetic is the tenderness of her last letters! "As to what I owe her [Cassandra], and the anxious affection of all my beloved family on this occasion, I can only cry over it, and pray God to bless them more and more." And again: "If ever you are ill, may you be as tenderly nursed as I have been. May the same blessed alleviations of anxious friends be yours; and may you possess, as I dare say you will, the greatest blessing of all, in the consciousness of not being unworthy of their love. I could not feel this." Surely those with such a longing and with such a sense of unworthiness are not the least worthy of love in this harsh, self-absorbed, and loveless world.

Nevertheless, what remains most characteristic of Miss Austen is her singular and inexhaustible delight in the observation of humanity. No one illustrates better than she the odd paradox that it is possible to love mankind as a whole, or, at any rate, to take the greatest interest in them, while finding most individual specimens uninteresting and even contemptible. I think she would have understood perfectly that wonderful passage in a letter of another authoress not unlike her, Mrs. Craigie: "I live in a world and among beings of my own creation, and when I hear of tangible mortals, what they do, what they say, and what they think, I feel a stranger and a pilgrim; life frightens me; humanity terrifies me; perhaps that is why it is real suffering for me to be in a room with more than one other. I believe I am a lover of souls, but people scare me out of my wits: it is not that I am nervous. I have only a sensation of being, as it were, in 'the wrong Paradise.' I am not at home: I talk about things I do not believe in to people who do not believe me: I become constrained, artificial."

"I am a great wonderer," says one of Miss Austen's characters. I think she was a great wonderer herself.

How fertile this interest in human nature was, what endless and richly varied entertainment it afforded, is made

manifest in many passages throughout both novels and letters. "I did not know before," says Bingley to Elizabeth, "that you were a studier of character. It must be an amusing study." Elizabeth's creatress found it so. When she visits picture-galleries, she confesses that she cannot look at the pictures for the men and women. In trying social situations the watchful critical instinct remains imperturbable and revels in the unguarded display of emotion commonly concealed. "Anything like a breach of punctuality was a great offense, and Mr. Moore was very angry, which I was rather glad of. I wanted to see him angry." Even in the most solemn crises the habit of curious observation cannot be wholly extinguished. Writing to her sister, with deep and genuine sympathy, on occasion of a sister-in-law's death, she interjects this query, which strikes you like a flat slap on an unexpectant cheek. "I suppose you see the corpse? How does it appear?" Finally, like all profound, minute observers of character, she realizes how far from perfect her knowledge is, that she cannot predict, cannot foresee. "Nobody ever feels or acts, suffers or enjoys, as one expects."

Miss Austen alone would be sufficient to disprove the contention that age and wide knowledge of the world are necessary for the understanding of the human heart. She had neither of these qualifications. Yet, though she may have missed many superficial varieties of experience, who knew better the essential motives that animate us all? She lived in a quiet neighborhood and saw comparatively few specimens; but those were enough. As she says, through Elizabeth, "people alter so much that there is something new to be observed in them forever."

Thus she herself enjoyed and pointed out to others the simplest, the most available, the most inexhaustible of all earthly distractions. Only I could wish she might have seen mankind a little more constantly on the amiable side. As Lamb well observed, almost all of Shakespeare's characters are lovable. How few of Miss Austen's are! Yet it may be that at twenty-one she knew better than Shakespeare.

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